

# Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

---

Volume 9

Issue 2 *Special Issue in Honor of Shelton H. Davis:  
Legacy to Anthropological Advocacy, Development  
Issues, and Indigenous Peoples' Movements*

Article 13

---

2011

## Steven Lee Rubinstein (1962 - 2012)

Daniela Peluso

University of Kent, [D.Peluso@kent.ac.uk](mailto:D.Peluso@kent.ac.uk)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Peluso, Daniela (2011). "Steven Lee Rubinstein (1962 - 2012)," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol9/iss2/13>

This Obituary is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## Steven Lee Rubinstein (1962 - 2012)

**DANIELA PELUSO**

**University of Kent, UK**

**D.Peluso@kent.ac.uk**

The sad news of Dr. Steve Lee Rubenstein's sudden and unexpected death at the age of 49 took us all by surprise. In fact, as I write this, months after Steve's passing, I am still grappling with the notion that he is gone from this world, as we know it. In some ways, Steve was only at the beginning of his career with many large ideas still unleashed and yet he had already achieved more than most do in one lifetime. As friends and colleagues of Steve's we have spent the last few months exchanging stories about his extraordinary mind, wit and generosity. Students have come forth to talk about how much he changed their way of reading texts and seeing the world, identifying him as the one person from their experience in higher education who actually made a difference to them, teaching them not only about anthropology but about life. Colleagues, young and old, have benefitted from his intense and heartfelt academic exchanges, and enjoyed his constructively critical and magnanimous manner. Steve was an interlocutor par excellence. As South Americanists we experienced first-hand his commitment to community building by bringing people and ideas together, never simply promoting himself. We have all watched him hold court in the lobbies of all the various conferences we attended. Wherever Steve sat became a magnetic hub, an intellectual watering hole across and beyond our discipline.

I cannot say enough to credit Steve with all that he deserves, especially for being a great friend, colleague and mentor. Yet rather to indulge in the anecdotes that many of us will continue to share, I would like to honor Steve by discussing his contribution to anthropology.

First a brief bio; Steve received his PhD in cultural anthropology from Columbia University in 1995 where he had also completed his MA and BA in anthropology alongside an additional BA in Philosophy from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Steve's undergraduate thesis focused on the English Civil War, a study that in some ways proved even more relevant following his eventual transatlantic relocation to the UK. At Columbia he studied closely with Robert Murphy, a tutelage that transpired daily since Steve was his 'pusher', wheeling him around in deep conversations over Zen Marxism or most likely, the Mundurucu. Through Bob, he was indoctrinated into Ken Kennsinger's Bennington conference, a predecessor to the formation of SALSA and a basis for the sense of strong sense community among Lowland South Americanists that we were fortunate enough to have experienced together as graduate students. His teachers also included Morton Fried, Libbet Crandon-Malamud, Joan Vincent, and Mick Taussig. After completing his dissertation, *Death in a Distant Place: The Politics of Shuar Shamans of the Ecuadorian Amazon*, he became a Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell University and later on a Fellow at the National Humanities Center. He taught for 8 years at Ohio University and in 2006 accepted the appointment as Reader in Latin American Anthropology and Director of the Research Institute of Latin American Studies and the Connected Communities Incubation Network at the University of Liverpool.

Steve's research was driven by over forty months of ethnographic fieldwork among Amazonian Shuar with the support from a variety of funders, including the Fulbright Foundation and the British Academy. His publications in leading journals across disciplines reflect his conviction that anthropology contributes to discussions that traverse the social sciences and

humanities. Steve's work built on Amazonian ethnology, traditionally focused on cultural ecology, social solidarity, and symbolic representation, in way that situated Shuar within wider histories and the concerns of political economy and post-colonial studies. His primary research interests were in contrasting systems of power, particularly in how different modes of colonialism produce different subjects and organizational forms. His research reflected his interest in Amazonia as a site for perennial frontiers between the state and capital in various guises and what Clastres called "societies against the state."

This led Steve to engage in research on state-formation and globalization in other parts of the world. His publications collectively focus on subject formation and troubled forms of agency within different political economies. His work is broadly situated within political economy and critical theory, and also engages with post-structuralist feminist theory. His Shuar work revolves around the codification and canalization of desire, for example in the form of masculine violence and most recently women's empowerment. He has focused on contrasting technologies of knowledge in relation to the circulation of different commodities at different scales (from machetes to oil), as a way to index transforming nexuses of desire, knowledge and power.

Steve was concerned with how Shuar today are caught between political practices that orient them towards other Amazonian peoples, and political practices that orient them toward Spanish-speaking Ecuadorian elites; one strand of Steve's work focuses on the ways these different practices form different kinds of subjects. His "Society and Space" article (2001) highlights the role of new forms of Shuar male agency in Shuar ethnogenesis, and how the reorganization of Shuar space was instrumental to Ecuadorian state formation on its Amazonian frontier. His first book, *Alejandro Tsakimp': A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History* (2002) presented the life history of a Shuar shaman and early Federation leader in terms of the interplay between these distinct forms of agency, expertly using the life history genre to address anthropological ideas that typically resist ethnographic abstraction and textual authority. Using his and Alejandro's words, he provides a nuanced analysis of the dilemmas facing Shuar, how these dilemmas create dilemmas for anthropologists, and how anthropology can and should respond. At the time of Steve's death, he was finishing two articles that explore Shuar responses to Ecuadorian racism as examples of the discursive construction of ethnic and national subjects.

In his *Cultural Anthropology* article (53 (1): 39-79), (2012) and 2009 chapter "Crossing Boundaries with Shrunk Heads" (in: Rubinstein & Fine-Dare, *Border Crossings: Transnational Americanist Anthropology*. University of Nebraska Press), Steve follows the movement of people and objects as they cross the boundary between these contrasting systems of power. This interest in the mobility of "culture" motivated his work on the 2009 volume, cited above, which challenges an outmoded Americanism that often prevents us from seeing that borders between North and South can be as illusory as they are federally patrolled and cruel. His current research, for which he had just received funding, was meant to draw on the life histories of Shuar women collected in 2006. Steve would have been conducting fieldwork this summer to record additional life histories necessary to complete his book on the political lives of Shuar women. As he was to argue in an article in preparation on "Women Warriors", the new ascendance of female leaders has made pre-existing, but marginalized, forms of "politics" more visible. As he explained in his *Current Anthropology* (2012) article, "On the Importance of Visions among the Amazonian Shuar" (*op. cit.*), their politics included discourses that grew out of psychotropically induced visions, which are also important in the formation of male leaders not allied with the

missionaries. Here he used Lacan's psychoanalytic theories as a way to further provide a theory of the subject.

Steve was also strongly committed to service at many levels. He believed it was part of our academic responsibility to regularly review journal submissions, read colleagues' work, and provide extensive feedback to those who seek it; this is something he reliably did regardless of his demanding calendar. He was especially proud of his term as associate editor at *Tipiti* and *Cultural Anthropology* as well as his recent post as book review editor for *Tipiti*. He also organized and chaired the Sixth Sesquiannual Meetings of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland Anthropology in San Antonio, Texas, and he was currently serving on the Organizing Committee for the 17th World Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. He had also just been appointed as a Fellow for the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

One of Steve's most anonymous yet extraordinary contributions was in his role as a dedicated Wikipedian, responsible for over 30,000 edits including corrections and contributions toward some of the most trafficked topics on anthropology-related pages. If you are missing Steve, I would like to suggest that you take some temporary refuge in his personal page at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Slrubenstein> - it may help console the tremendous loss of his no longer forthcoming legendary epic emails and of all he would have written; it will also remind us of his incorrigible compassion for humanity and knowledge, his wit and his insistence on rigor and creativity. What I hope most is that we shall keep him closest by carrying his work and ideas forward and to continue acknowledge his multiple contributions to anthropology.

Rubenstein, Steven

2012 "On the Importance of Visions among the Amazonian Shuar". *Current Anthropology* 53(1): 39-79.

----- with Fine-Dare, Kathleen S. (eds)

2009 *Border Crossings: Transnational Americanist Anthropology*. University of Nebraska Press.

-----

2009 "Crossing Boundaries with Shrunken Heads", in Fine-Dare and Rubenstein, *op. cit.*

-----

2008 "Comment: Interrogating the neo-pluralist orthodoxy in American anthropology." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 32, issue 1-2, pp. 97-106

-----

2006 "Circulation, Accumulation, and the Power of Shuar Shrunken Heads." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol 22, issue 3, pp 357-399.

-----

2004a "Fieldwork and the Erotic Economy on the Colonial Frontier." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol 29, issue 4, pp 1041-1071.

-----

2004b "Steps to a Political Anthropology of Amazonia." *Tipiti*, vol 2, issue 2, pp 131-176.

-----

2004c "Shuar Migrants and Shrunken Heads, Face to Face in a New York Museum." *Anthropology Today*, vol 20, issue 3, pp 15-19.

-----

2002 *Alejandro Tsakimp: A Shuar Healer in the Margins of History*. University of Nebraska Press.

-----

2001 "Colonialism, the Shuar Federation, and the Ecuadorian State." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol 19, issue 3, pp 263-293.